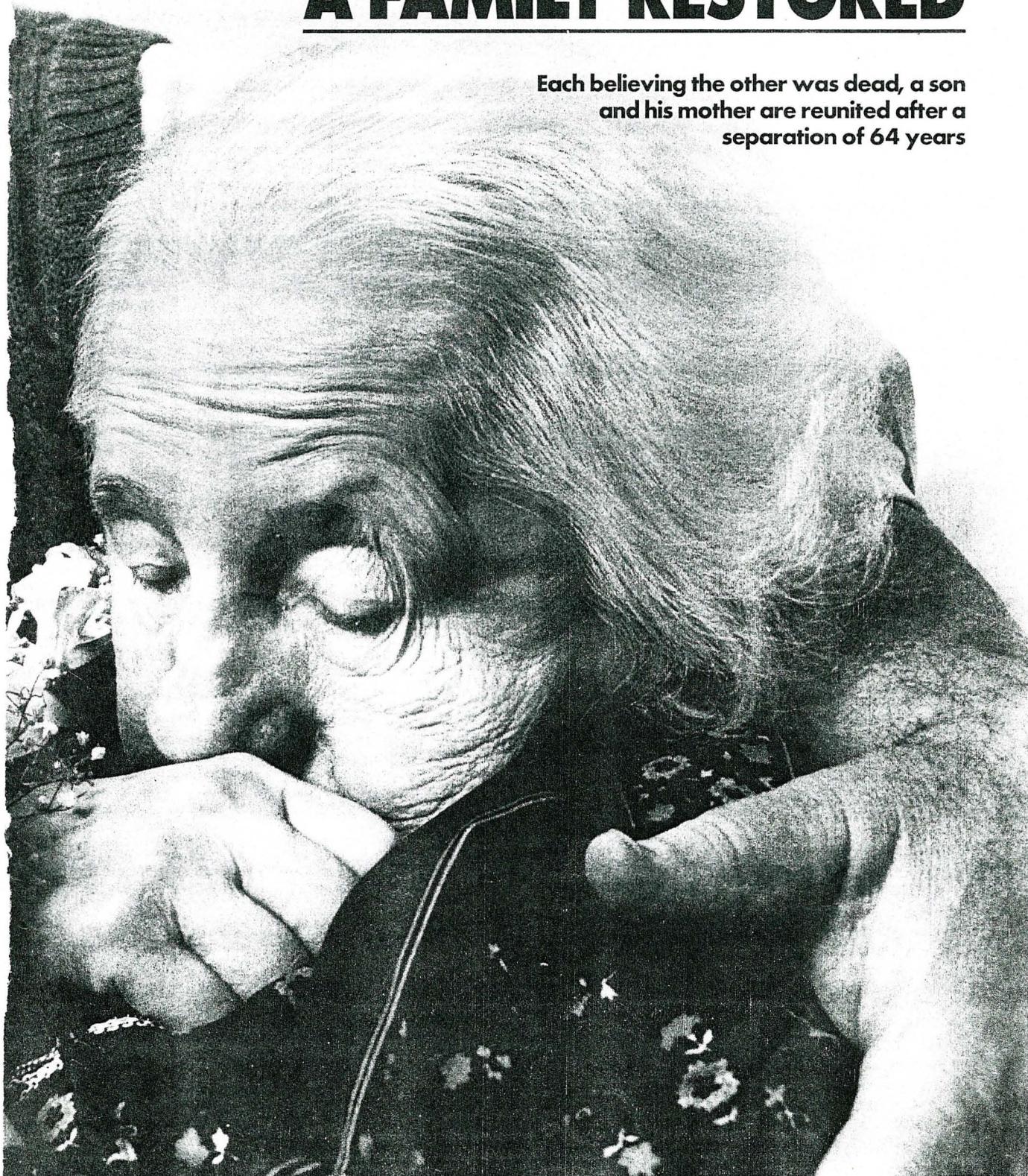


Daniluk

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# OUT OF THE ASHES, A FAMILY RESTORED

Each believing the other was dead, a son  
and his mother are reunited after a  
separation of 64 years



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At the institution  
where she has  
been confined  
since 1925, Ag-  
nes Daniluk is em-  
braced by her  
long-lost son.

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Paul Daniluk stands near the spot where his parents' farmhouse burned down in 1925. Below, Paul, 6, in New York in 1927.

**G**rowing up on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Paul Daniluk often wondered what had become of his mother. It was a subject his father, Anton, never discussed with his only child. Once, when Paul was 9 or 10, he asked his father—not for the first time, but more insistently than usual—"Where is my mother?"

Anton got angry. "Your mother died in a farm fire," he snapped. "We will not talk about her ever again. Period."

They did, but the answer was always the same.

It was three days after Christmas, nearly 60 years later, when the phone rang in Paul's house in Denver. Joe Daniluk, 40, the eldest of his seven children, was on the line. "Dad, are you sitting down?" he asked.

Paul's first thought was that his son Tom, who was flying home from Ohio with his wife, had died in a plane crash. "No, Dad," Joe said gently, "this is good news. We found your mother. She's alive and well in a New York hospital."

Paul gasped, then began to sob. "Is this for real, Joe?"

"Yes. Your mother's alive."



The story of Paul Daniluk's family begins back in Russia, around the turn of the century, when Anton Daniluk was growing up. "He once told me," says Paul, now 68, "that his town was attacked when he was a boy—I'm not sure whether it was

by the Cossacks or the Bolsheviks. He said that for two days and nights he hid in the mud until he couldn't hear the horses' hooves any longer and that he never went back." Instead, Anton made his way west. Around 1914, when he was 18 years old, he stowed away on a Canadian-bound freighter, sneaked into the U.S. and settled in New York City.

That same year 20-year-old Agnes Dutcheck left Poland and landed at Ellis Island with her mother. In New York she went to work as a maid. Three years later she met and married Anton. The couple moved to Homer, N.Y., near Ithaca, where they found work on a 40-acre dairy farm. In 1921 Paul was born, and by 1923 they had saved enough money to buy the farm for \$12,600.

That much of his family history Paul Daniluk had known. The rest he has learned only in the last several weeks, as he and his children have pored over medieval records and old newspapers and have spoken with hospital personnel in Upstate New York.

At the heart of it all is the fire.

On a Monday in early April 1925, Anton walked to the town of Cortland to spend the evening. Agnes and 4-year-old

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Paul were at home. Returning that night, Anton saw a glow in the sky. As the Cortland *Democrat* later reported, "Many cars passed him, hurrying to the fire, [but] it did not occur to him that it was his house. It was not until he was at the end of his three-mile walk that he realized that he and his family were homeless."

When Agnes Daniluk discovered the blaze, which apparently began in the chimney, she rushed into the room where her son was sleeping, wrapped him in his bed sheet and carried him to safety. Then she fainted. Tragically, she was never the same person again. At a neighbor's house the next morning, she started at the slightest sound and kept muttering to herself, "Fire . . . fire." Moved to the county sanatorium, she began to babble incessantly, calming herself only when Anton would bring Paul for a visit. As soon as they left, she would start to scream. Ten days after the fire, suffering from hallucinations that she was about to be burned, Agnes was committed to the Binghamton (N.Y.) Psychiatric Center. In late April a doctor reported that Agnes "believed that some harm had come to a daughter, who she says is 4." In September she was observed "inclining her head towards the different corners of the ward as if hearing voices." Her

condition was diagnosed as "dementia praecox," as schizophrenia was known at the time. Anton took his son and moved back to Manhattan. Later he had his marriage annulled. As far as Paul knows, he never saw his wife again.

Growing up, Paul remembered nothing of the fire. But he was haunted by vivid



"He was a quiet man, but when he was bothered, he would fly off the handle and do battle in a minute," says Paul of his father, Anton (at left, in 1936), who died 14 years ago. Agnes (holding a purse) posed with a friend, c. 1917.

mental images that came to him from time to time, unexpectedly. "One picture was of being in a high-back chair with a bed sheet around me," he recalls. "There were people looking down at me, and on one side of the sheet there was a kind of heat. I remember looking up and seeing a huge pine tree with branches that began halfway up the trunk. There was a strange light all around."

Another image was of sitting with his father on a bench in a redbrick building on a hill. The building had white wood trim, he recalls.

"The floors are shiny, and there's this woman walk-

ing briskly up and down with what seems to be a push broom," says Paul. "She seems very, very strong. She turns around and looks firmly at me. Her mouth is very tight, and she has this bewildered, intense look in her eyes. I never knew who she was."

On the Lower East Side, Paul and his father, a laborer, lived on poverty's edge,

often surviving on macaroni and ketchup. At one point Anton gave Paul a violin he won while gambling. Paul learned to play it so well that he was accepted at Juilliard after he graduated from high school. But in 1941, after a summer at the music school, Paul joined the Navy and spent World War II on supply ships. In 1945 he married Thelma Rainville, a 23-year-old honor student from Maine. Later, after studying construction and architecture at the University of Denver, he went into door manufacturing. Before he and Thelma divorced in 1979, they raised six sons and a daughter, who themselves now have six sons among them.

Paul's children grew up knowing only that their father's mother had died in a fire on her farm. But last summer Paul told his daughter, Tanya, 30, a comptroller at a Denver restaurant, of his recurring visions, including the one of the redbrick building on the hill. Coincidentally, last December, Tanya's brother Tom, 32, who owns a construction firm in Oklahoma City, noticed the name Daniluk—an unusual one—in a newspaper article while he and his wife were visiting her parents in Canton, Ohio. Tom told his father about it. Later, when Paul men-

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Paul and his children (from left, Mike, Joe, Peter, Philip, Tanya, Richard and Tom) surround Agnes at the hospital.

tioned to Tanya that she might have cousins in Ohio, it made her think of the grandmother she had never known. "I wanted to know where she was buried so I could put flowers on her grave," she says. Looking for help, she called her brother Joe, 40, a Denver-based computer consultant.

The two of them placed a conference call to Albany, N.Y., and asked the operator for the names of any hospitals that might have existed in the 1920s. The operator drew a blank. Then Tanya asked if she knew of a redbrick building with white trim, on a hill. Remarkably, the operator did. She gave Tanya the number of the Binghamton Psychiatric Center.

Could her grandmother still be alive? Tanya wondered. "That's impossible," Joe said. "She'd be over 100." But when they called the center and asked for an Agnes Daniluk, the reply left them speechless. "Just a minute," said a receptionist. "I'll ring that floor." The nurse on duty was suspicious at first. Agnes' records said she had no family. The nurse asked the grandchildren to tell her what they knew about her 95-year-old patient. "Oh, my God," she said finally. "I think you've found your grandmother." All three wept. Then Joe called his father.

On hearing the news, Paul says he felt as if "someone had dropped the atomic bomb. Within 15 seconds all these deep emotions that I never knew existed came out. I still have no words to express it."

Two weeks later Paul, Joe and Tom flew to Binghamton. A social worker at the psychiatric center warned them not to expect too much from the reunion. By 1947 Agnes had become violent, and in September 1955 she had been given a pre-frontal lobotomy. The procedure left her incontinent and more withdrawn, rarely speaking except to shout "No!" or "Leave me alone!" Since then she had disliked being touched by anyone.

Paul listened but would not be put off. "Her condition didn't matter to me," he says. "All I wanted to do was radiate warmth and tell her I loved her. That's all I really had to say." As they crossed the shiny linoleum of Ward 89, Paul saw an ancient woman sitting in a wheelchair. Her eyes were closed, her hands crossed tightly on her chest, and she was uttering not altogether friendly guttural noises.

Even so, Paul knew instantly that it was his mother. One of his recurring visions



suddenly was a mystery no more. "It was the face of the woman who pushed the broom," he says. As he approached, the face contorted. "Leave . . . me . . . alone," Agnes muttered. Undeterred, Paul pulled up a chair. When Agnes finally opened her eyes, he saw the same blue that had been passed on to six of his grandchildren—and which had puzzled the rest of his brown-eyed family for years. He took Agnes' hand, touching her for the first time since the fire that had separated them. "Moya Matka," he said quietly—Russian for "my mother." Very slowly, Agnes began to smile.

The three men, her son and two of her grandsons, took turns sitting with the old woman. From time to time she clapped with excitement. "I'm Tom, son of Pauli," said Tom, taking his grandmother by the wrist. "Remember the fire? Pauli didn't die, Agnes. Pauli is alive." Tom felt Agnes' pulse start to race. Then, quietly, Joe told her the names of all her descendants. "I wanted her to know she had a family," he says. "I must have said their names a thousand times over."

When Paul sat with her again, Agnes started to cry. "I know I reached her," he says. "She may not know exactly who we are, but she knows we are of great importance to her."

Later that day Paul, Tom and Joe went looking for the place where the farmhouse once stood. All they knew was the name of the road. At one point they passed a shallow stream, and Paul remembered another cryptic vision—of his

father washing his car in the same stream. Arriving at the place where his parents' farmhouse had once stood—he recognized the landscape—Paul introduced himself to the homeowner standing outside

and asked if a huge pine tree with branches starting halfway up the trunk had once stood in the yard. Yes, he was told; it had been cut down about 20 years back. At once, Paul began to feel a peace of mind he had never known before. "All my life I've been a camera with just a few pictures," he says. "Now a whole film is coming together. The pictures in my head were real. It all really happened."

Finding Agnes has done more than

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ease an ache Paul barely knew existed. It has also given him a new understanding of his difficult father. "I completely misinterpreted my father," he says. "He would lose his temper and go after people, and it all seemed very vulgar to me. I developed a deep embarrassment of him. Now I'm ashamed of not giving him the love and respect he deserved. He must have felt it would ruin my life to know about my mother. I wouldn't have been man enough to do what he did, to raise me by himself."

Paul does not plan to remove his mother from the psychiatric center, where the staff treat Agnes almost like family. "It wouldn't be right to do that to her," he says. "This is all she's known for 64 years." Instead, two weeks ago, Paul returned to Binghamton with all seven of his children. In turn, they introduced themselves and spoke of their own children. "Agnes, this is from your great-grandson Steven," said Joe, handing her a drawing covered with houses cut out of paper. "He's 8 years old. He knows you don't see so well, so he made this for you." Apparently unable to open her eyes, Agnes stroked the figures with her fingertips. "Agnes, can I hold your hand?" Tanya asked. At first Agnes failed to respond. But when Tanya asked again minutes later, the old woman placed her hand in her granddaughter's open palm. "She can't say it, but I know in my heart that the memories of Anton and Paul have kept her going," Tanya says. "I feel like she's been with me all my life."

Before they left the next day, Paul, Joe, Tanya and Tom gathered to say goodbye. The nurses lifted Agnes to her feet so Tanya could hug her, and a beaming smile broke across the old woman's face. Then, to everyone's surprise, a raspy sound began deep in her throat. "Ahhh," she began, as her listeners stood transfixed. "Ahhh . . . luhh . . . ahhh . . . luhh . . . youuu." She faltered and tried again. "Ahhh . . . luhhh . . . vvv . . . youuu. Eyeahhh love youuu." Agnes repeated it over and over. Finally, still smiling, she allowed the nurses to wheel her away. "Daddy," Tanya said through her tears, "she knows!"

"Yes, honey," said her father, looking down the hall. "She knows."

—*Margot Dougherty,  
and Dirk Mathison in Binghamton*

"I'm your granddaughter and I love you very much," Tanya told Agnes. After a moment, the old woman smiled.

